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Statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Poverty eradication programmes have generally focused on the creation of material wealth. While these measures have improved living standards in some parts of the world, inequality remains widespread. In its 2005 *Report on the World Social Situation*, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat highlighted the growing chasm between formal and informal economies, the widening gap between skilled and unskilled workers and the growing disparities in health and education, as well as in opportunities for social, economic and political participation. It has been well documented that the focus on growth and income generation has not necessarily translated into significant social improvements, and that growing inequality has rendered the global community increasingly unstable and insecure.

The Baha'i International Community wishes to contribute to the Commission's discussion of poverty eradication by considering the related phenomena of the extremes of poverty and wealth. While the goal of poverty eradication is widely endorsed, the notion of eliminating extremes of wealth is challenging to many. Some fear that it could be used to undermine the market economy, to stifle entrepreneurship or to impose income equalization measures. This is not what we mean. To be sure, material wealth is of critical importance to the achievement of individual and collective goals; by the same token, a strong economy is a key component of a vibrant social order. We propose that recognition of the problem of the extremes of poverty and wealth concerns itself, in essence, with the nature of relationships that bind individuals, communities and nations. Today, most of the world's people live in societies characterized by relationships of dominance — whether of one nation over another, one race by another, one social class by another, one religious or ethnic group by another, or one sex by another. In this context, a discourse on the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth presumes that societies cannot flourish in an environment that fuels inequitable access to resources, to knowledge and to meaningful participation in the life of society.

In this contribution, we briefly reflect on the manner in which the following aspects of society contribute to these extremes: a materialistic worldview, assumptions about human nature, the means of generating wealth and access to knowledge. We propose an alternative set of assumptions and consider how these might advance a more equitable economic environment.

The dominant model of development depends on a society of vigorous consumers of material goods. Endlessly rising levels of consumption are cast as indicators of progress and prosperity. This materialistic worldview, which underpins much of modern economic thinking, reduces concepts of value, human purpose and human interactions to the self-interested pursuit of material wealth. The inevitable result, an unfettered cultivation of needs and wants, has led to a system dependent on excessive consumption by the few, while reinforcing exclusion and poverty for the many.

As most people would acknowledge, however, the materialistic worldview does not capture the totality of human experience. This includes expressions of love and self-sacrifice, the quest for knowledge and justice, attraction to beauty and to truth and the search for meaning and purpose, to name but a few. In fact, the progress and vitality of the social order requires a coherent relationship between the

material and spiritual dimensions of human life. Within such an order, economic arrangements support the development of just and peaceful human relations and presume that every individual has a contribution to make to the betterment of society.

Consider that, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, nearly 800 million adults cannot read or write; that two and a half billion people lack basic sanitation; and that nearly half of the world's children live in poverty. At the other extreme, a mere handful of individuals, approximately 500 billionaires, control 7 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP). We have an economic system that generates extreme inequality. Many assume that such inequality, while undesirable, is necessary for the generation of wealth. If the process by which wealth is accumulated is characterized by the oppression and domination of others, how, in such an environment, can we hope to mobilize the material, intellectual and moral resources needed to eradicate poverty?

Many would acknowledge that the legitimacy of wealth depends on how it is acquired and how it is expended. Wealth is commendable to the highest degree if it is acquired through earnest effort and diligent work, if the measures to generate that wealth serve to enrich society as a whole and if the wealth obtained through those measures is expended to promote knowledge, education, industry and, in general, to advance human civilization. The principle of justice can be expressed on different levels related to the process of the acquisition of wealth. Employers and their employees, for example, are bound to the laws and conventions that regulate their work. Each is expected to carry out his or her responsibilities with honesty and integrity. At another level, we can consider whether the measures generating the wealth are serving to enrich society and to promote its well-being. The various approaches to obtaining wealth must enter into the discourse on poverty eradication, so that measures which involve the exploitation of others, the monopolization and manipulation of markets and the production of goods that promote violence and tear at the social fabric can be fully explored and scrutinized by the generality of the people. For example, we can ask: Is the relationship between wages and the cost of living just and equitable? What kind of wealth-generating measures could serve to enrich the generality of people rather than a select few?

Alongside this discourse, the eradication of the extremes of poverty and wealth will require no less than a knowledge revolution. Such a revolution will need to redefine the role of every individual, community and nation in the generation and application of knowledge. It will need to acknowledge both science and religion as two complementary systems of knowledge, which throughout history have made possible the investigation of reality and the advancement of civilization. As these processes unfold, they will help to transform the quality and legitimacy of education, of science and technology, as well as patterns of consumption and production. The masses of the world's people cannot continue to be regarded only as consumers and end-users of technology originating in industrial countries. Such an orientation suffocates the necessary levels of human enterprise and creativity needed to address today's pressing challenges. The development of capacity to identify technological need, to innovate and to adapt existing technologies is vital. If successfully developed, such capacity would serve to break the unbalanced flow of knowledge from North to South, from urban to rural and from men to women. It would help to expand the concept of "modern" technology to one characterized by

locally defined needs and by priorities that take into account a community's material and spiritual well-being.

As expressed in the introduction to this statement, the eradication of poverty cannot be conceived in terms of improving the material wealth of the poor alone. It is a larger undertaking rooted in relationships that define the interactions between individuals, communities and nations. We invite other parties actively working to establish a more just and equitable social and economic order to engage with us in dialogue about these underlying issues in order to learn from each other and to collectively advance efforts towards these ends. We conclude with a number of questions for your consideration:

What is the purpose of an economy? What assumptions about human nature underlie our understanding of the purpose of an economy? How do we understand the concept of wealth?

In what ways do the extremes of poverty and wealth stifle development, empowerment and healthy relationships? What kinds of identities are formed with the existence of these two extremes (for example, dependent, self-righteous, consumer, producer and so forth)? How do these identities perpetuate inequality?

What is the role of knowledge — as derived from both science and religion — in transforming our economic structures and processes?

How can we conceptualize the nature and purpose of work, wealth and economic empowerment beyond notions of utility maximization on the part of self-interested individuals?

What are the roles of the individual, the community, the corporate sector and elected leaders vis-à-vis the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth? What does this look like in practice?

What are the entry points for making changes in the economy? What motivates individuals, communities, corporations and Governments to reform economic structures and processes? From where do they derive their purpose and commitment?

What widely held conceptions or beliefs hinder our ability to transform the economic systems we have today? How can these be overcome?